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SUBJECT: "POPULAR RESISTANCE": FIVE YEARS ON

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Classified By: Consul General Daniel Rubinstein, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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I1. (SBU) February 19 marks the fifth anniversary of weekly "popular resistance" protests against Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank village of Bil'in. Since demonstrations against the barrier began, they have attracted a wide range of anti-settlement NGOs and international activists. These demonstrations have since spread to four other West Bank towns. The "popular resistance" movement's tactics have achieved some successes, including a September 2007 Israeli High Court ruling to re-route a portion of the barrier in Bil'in, which was implemented earlier this month. However, despite their nonviolent moniker, demonstrations have often devolved into rock-throwing, met with a sometimes stern response by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). While these weekly events remain local phenomena, they have attracted the attention of the Palestinian political class. Fatah has appropriated "popular resistance" as part of its platform, though privately many contacts see these demonstrations as largely symbolic. Prime Minister Fayyad has expressed concern over escalating IDF tactics toward demonstrators and international activists, and the potential for overreaction to raise the political profile of these events. End Summary.

BIL'IN PROTESTS REACH FIFTH ANNIVERSARY

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I2. (SBU) Starting in 2005, residents of the West Bank village of Bil'in (outside of Modi'in Illit settlement) and their supporters have gathered weekly at the local mosque at noon each Friday, walking to the separation barrier, which divides the residents of Bil'in from the Israeli settlement of Modi'in Illit, to protest the expropriation of 2,300 dunums (570 acres) of Bil'in's farmland during the barrier's construction. Following the protesters' success in obtaining a 2007 Israeli High Court ruling in their favor, which required the dismantling of part of the barrier and the re-routing of 1,700 meters of high-voltage fence (returning about 650 dunums of olive groves to Bil'in), demonstrations spread to the nearby communities of Ni'lin, al-Ma'sara, Biddu, and Nabi Saleh.

SLOW ISRAELI RESPONSE TO PROTESTERS' COURT VICTORIES

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**¶3.** (SBU) Israeli officials were slow to respond to the 2007 decision in favor of Bil'in's residents, despite the protests' continuation. No groundwork was laid by the IDF for implementation of the court order until February 11, 2010, two-and-a-half years after the initial court order, and a year after the Israeli government had been found in contempt of court for its failure to act in accordance with the court's instructions. Nevertheless, the Bil'in protests and the larger "popular resistance" movement of which they are a part have gathered increasing attention from West Bank residents and local Palestinian and Israeli media.

ORGANIZERS APPEAL TO INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE

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**¶4.** (SBU) The weekly protests in Bil'in and Ni'lin also sought to engage an international audience by posting a professionally-designed, multi-lingual website detailing the history of the controversy over the barrier's route, its humanitarian impact, and the ongoing demonstrations. Protest organizers have also sought to attract media attention through photogenic costume choices. On December 25, 2009, for example, protesters dressed in Santa Claus suits drew non-lethal fire from IDF while hoisting aloft a Christmas tree decorated with spent tear gas canisters. On February 12, demonstrators marched to the barrier wearing blue face paint and dressed as characters from the recent movie "Avatar."

PA SPEAKS OUT IN SUPPORT OF POPULAR RESISTANCE...

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**¶5.** (SBU) Locally, the Bil'in rallies have become an oft-cited example of Palestinian "popular resistance," a strategy advocated by Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) at the Fatah party's Sixth General Conference in Bethlehem in August 2009. Abbas's calls for the Bil'in and Ni'lin protests to be replicated throughout the West Bank won the support of PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and other senior Palestinian political figures. Fatah Central Committee member Mahmud al-Aloul, who announced on January 6 that Fatah intended to intensify its efforts in popular resistance, was joined by Fatah Central Committee member Tawfiq Tirawi at an anti-barrier protest at Nabi Saleh, north of Jerusalem, on January 15.

...HOWEVER, MOVEMENT REMAINS LOCALIZED

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**¶6.** (C) Despite the interest of the Palestinian political establishment in promoting popular resistance, the movement remains localized and to some extent fragmented. In 2009, the PA established a Supreme Coordinating Committee (SCC) to oversee the efforts of grassroots popular resistance committees throughout the West Bank. Unlike similar bodies established during the Second Intifada, the SCC's posture has been largely reactive, and rather than organizing or coordinating protests, it has largely served as a venue in which various local factions vie for, and claim, credit for independent grassroots initiatives.

PROTESTS LARGEY NON-VIOLENT

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**¶7.** (C) Popular resistance protests in Bil'in and Ni'lin have remained largely non-violent, although Jonathan Pollack, media liaison for the Bil'in Popular Struggle Committee, said that "occasionally teenagers throw stones." Committee member Muhammad al-Khatib, a 36-year-old father of four, noted that the committee discouraged local youth from stone-throwing at the weekly protests, as it undermined Bil'in's image. "It is not fair for the settlements to expand at our expense," al-Khatib told Post. "But we know that violence leads to violence. We need to make a difference for our lives and for

our people without giving the Israelis a reason to punish us."

PM FAYYAD CRITICIZES IDF RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

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**¶8.** (C) IDF and Israeli Police personnel stationed on the far side of the barrier during weekly protests in Bil'in and Ni'lin have responded to rock throwing with tear gas, stun grenades, sound bombs, and rubber-coated bullets. Recently, Israeli Border Police and the IDF have begun using specially-treated water to disperse the crowds. According to Israeli security interlocutors, the water, which is sprayed as a mist, has an overwhelming odor of sewage that lasts for days and can induce vomiting.

**¶9.** (C) PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad also expressed his concern that increasingly harsh Israeli crowd control tactics could trigger violence if they resulted in the injury or death of protesters. Fayyad said he had recently met with the heads of the "popular resistance" committees in Bil'in Ni'lin and other areas where weekly demonstrations occur to reinforce the importance of nonviolence. "Whatever you can do to tell the Israelis to change their tactics is essential," Fayyad told Post.

**¶10.** (C) The best outcome is to allow peaceful demonstrations to continue within clearly defined boundaries, Fayyad said. He claimed most of the leaders were well-known peace activists, who present no security risks. Nonetheless, 43 have been arrested for participating in these demonstrations, one activist has been killed, and several others wounded, Fayyad added. Some of the charges levied against demonstrators are spurious, Fayyad claimed, citing the example of one activist detained for weapons possession because gas mask filters were confiscated from him.

**¶11.** (C) Fayyad claimed he had spoken to Israeli Minister of Defense Ehud Barak about the issue. "I asked him to stop going after these guys. Why arrest them?" He expressed concern that the more the Israeli side politicized these demonstrations through what he described as heavy-handed tactics, the greater the chance that the situation could escalate beyond weekly nonviolent demonstrations to something worse. "Some in (Fatah) see these demonstrations as an alternative to negotiations," Fayyad said. For the most part, Fatah leaders have participated only once or twice before "becoming bored of it and moving on to something else."

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NINETEEN DEATHS SINCE 2004

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**¶12.** (C) According to Pollack, since 2004, 19 participants in West Bank popular resistance protest have been killed, including 10-year-old Ahmed Moussa, who was shot in the head with high-velocity tear gas canister used by Israeli Border Police to disperse a crowd in Ni'lin in 2008. In April 2009, Ibrahim Abu Rahmah died after being hit in the chest by a tear gas canister. Press accounts assess that "hundreds" have been injured over the years, some seriously, including AmCit Tristan Anderson, who was left brain-damaged in 2008 after a head injury caused by a high-velocity tear gas canister.

ARRESTS OF ACTIVISTS ONGOING AND INCREASING

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**¶13.** (SBU) Since 2005, the IDF has detained 80 residents of Bil'in, 34 of them in the last six months of 2009. Al-Khatib was first arrested on August 3, 2009, on charges of stone-throwing, and released two weeks later when his lawyer demonstrated to the satisfaction of a military court that al-Khatib was outside the West Bank on the day photographs offered as evidence of his involvement were taken. Al-Khatib

was re-arrested on January 28, and released February 3 on bail, on the proviso he not attend the weekly demonstrations.

LAWYER: PROTESTERS NOT COMMITTING CRIME

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¶14. (C) In December 2009, Bil'in protest organizer Abdullah Abu Rahmah was charged by Israeli prosecutors in a military court with incitement, stone-throwing, and arms possession -- the arms in question, according to Rahmah's attorney, being spent tear gas canisters fired at Rahmah by the IDF. "What's next," Rahmah's attorney asked the local press, "charging protesters money for the bullets shot at them?" Israeli attorney Gaby Lasky, who represents a number of Bil'in and Ni'lin activists, told Post, "these people are not committing a crime. They're simply making the Israeli government uncomfortable."

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVISTS TARGETED

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¶15. (C) International activists have also been targeted for arrest. On January 11, IDF and Israeli immigration officials belonging to the "Oz Unit" entered downtown Ramallah at night and arrested Czech International Solidarity Movement (ISM) activist Eva Novakova, who was deported on the basis that she lacked a valid Israeli visa within 24 hours. On February 7, according to local media, IDF and Oz Unit officials detained two additional ISM activists, Spanish citizen Ariadna Jove Marti, and Australian citizen Bridgette Chapell. Both women were released on February 8 on the agreement that they not re-enter the West Bank; Israeli judicial officials criticized the involvement of Oz Unit in actions inside the Palestinian Territories.

PA COUNCIL OF MINISTERS CONDEMS ARRESTS

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¶16. (C) PA officials and local NGOs have criticized IDF rules-of-engagement at popular resistance demonstrations as well as the targeted arrest of activists involved in the protests. On February 15, the PA Council of Ministers issued a statement condemning "the Israeli targeting of peaceful activists and members of the anti-wall and anti-settlement campaign." Al-Khatib said that in his view, IDF use of force at the weekly protests had dissuaded a certain number of potential protesters from participating, noting that many West Bank residents who are dependent on Israeli authorities for movement and access were reluctant to risk retaliation.

MOVEMENT MUST BEAR FRUIT TO GAIN MOMENTUM

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¶17. (C) Al-Khatib noted, however, that the greatest constraint on the expansion of the popular resistance in the West Bank was a public perception that the movement's victories had so far been limited. Speaking before Israeli officials announced on February 6 that they intended to begin re-routing a portion of the barrier in Bil'in, al-Khatib said, "Right now, many villagers see our protests as useless.

The IDF wounds several of us every week, and the Ministry of Defense ignores the High Court. When popular resistance earns us our rights, you will see that armed resistance loses

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its appeal."

PA ROLE IN MOVEMENT'S FUTURE UNCERTAIN

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¶18. (C) Following the Israeli announcement, al-Khatib told local Palestinian media he considered the Israeli decision to implement the court order an "accomplishment" for the village, and noted the importance to the protests of "international and Israeli solidarity groups."

RUBINSTEIN